

CITY OF NEWARK, NJ'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Joseph Clark -- July 8, 1996

Q: It is approximately 8 o'clock. This is your interviewer Pauline Blount, and I have arrived at the Essex County Youth House in the City of Newark to interview Mr. Joe Louis Clark. Good morning, Mr. Clark, how are you today?

Clark: Fine, thank you. My name is Joe Louis Clark. I was a life-long resident of the City of Newark. Graduates elementary school Newark, at that particular time it was Monmouth Street School. Went to Cleveland Junior High, where I graduated. And ultimately graduated from Central High School in Newark in 1958.

Q: Okay, what is your marital status, Mr Clark?

Clark: My marital status, single.

Q: Okay. You have children?

Clark: I have three children.

Q: And their names?

Clark: My daughter is a three-time Olympian. Joetta Clark. I have a son, Joe Clark, Jr., a graduate of Villanova. Track coach of the University of Florida in Gainesville. And I have my last daughter who is a sophomore at the University of Florida in Gainesville. My children have all achieved very high status and stature, and I attribute that to unswerving dedication and commitment to my children. That is something that I have not found consistent in our society today. Black Americans have defaulted on their responsibilities to their children. And as a result of that, there's virtual chaos and pandemonium in the black community that has us precariously

placed, perched as a collective race. If there's any such thing as a collective race.

Q: Okay. When did you move to Newark or were you born and raised in Newark?

Clark: I came to Newark when I was four years old. Been here all my life. Newark is the only place I know.

Q: Okay. What is your parents' name? Your mother.

Clark: My parents are both deceased. My mother's name was Mattie Clark. Very active in the church. Abyssinian Baptist Church on West Kenney Street where we all grew up. Reverend Means was the pastor then. She was the president of the Usher Board, very active in the political structure in the Third Ward. My father was a deacon at Abyssinian Church. Worked for many years at Blanchard Brothers on Vreleesyon Avenue. They eventually closed down which caused havoc, I guess, in his life.

Q: What about your father? Did he have his own business or did he work, what kind of work did he do?

Clark: My father was typical of blacks then working. He was a laborer. Probably an illiterate man, but hard working. Had five, six children that he took care of in a magnanimous manner. Good solid American.

Q: That's great. And your mother, did she work?

Clark: My mother took care of the children up to a point, but on occasion did domestic work.

Q: What was life like for you and your family in growing up in Newark? What was it like for you? Were there good times or bad times or?

Clark: There were good times early on, and they were transformed into bad times. But, in any event, the quality of life in Newark as compared to today was, I think, a much higher quality than exists today. There was a greater sense of community, a greater sense of homogeneity, a greater sense of working together, streets were safer, people more cordial, the drug epidemic was non-existence although there were drugs --

Q: Right.

Clark: -- and there was an overall sense of pride and dignity and respectability that's so illusive today in the City of Newark and in our cities throughout the nation. The quality of life in Newark I thought very, very good. I remember on many a day I would shine shoes on Broad and Market Street. It was a hub of activity. Soldiers would come in and tourists would come in to see the glitter and the glamour of the illustrious City of Newark. I would shine shoes and make a whole bundle of money doing the type of things that I don't see it happening anymore. There were movies everywhere. Even the Harold Burnett shows were great attractive mechanisms for so many men and women to come and see the type of things that they enjoyed seeing. So the quality of life and the enthusiasm in Newark was absolutely exemplary in comparison to today.

Q: Okay. What street and community, what was it like in Newark? What street did you live in. What community? South Ward or North Ward or?

Clark: Well, we really didn't have South Wards or North Wards at that time. But I did live in, and my first experience in Newark was in the North, what is now called the North Ward. I lived in an Italian section in the North Ward in a storefront apartment. My grandfather had come up north from the south and got situated, and ultimately, I guess, sent for his children to come up. I was so young I don't recall all of the nuances involved in the process. But in any event, we ended up in a storefront on Factory Street in Newark. And that was a very remarkable and unforgettable experience. There was turmoil and tumult that we experienced as, I guess, as blacks living in a storefront in an all Italian neighborhood. And eventually we were able to elude the grasp of that

neighborhood. And we ended up miraculously in our own house, somehow, on Quitman Street in Newark. How it happened I do not know. All I know is that uncles and aunts all lived there, and they pooled their money together somehow, I guess, and ended up buying a house. I lived there for many years. And then trouble emerged its ominous head, and chaos and pandemonium ensued in the basic structure of my family. And from that point on it was an ongoing trek of living in a myriad of different places. I lived in fifteen different homes in the City of Newark. Sometimes on the precipice of homelessness. But nonetheless, there an unswerving tenacity and determination to be something of significance and to become a vibrant entity in a society that become very arduous, very complex, and very difficult for the fractured structure that has erupted in the family.

Q: What about the community stores? Were you able to go, or was the family able to go and buy food and stuff? You know, did you have enough money to feed everybody, your father, mother?

Clark: Well, we somehow managed to survive. You know, we had the Jewish stores, and they would give you food with a little book and charge you. I guess exorbitant prices for it, but, in any event, you always had accessibility to them. There was some type of camaraderie that existed between blacks and Jews back then, and I would like to think that it still exists. If I really look back on my upbringing in the City of Newark, Jewish people played, of course, blacks did because those were the people that I was around because I am black. But Jewish people played a key role in the upbringing. Because they were the teachers, they were the business people. And I have very, very favorable experience with them. That's been my experience. I carried their groceries. They would give them keys to their home. Let me go into their refrigerators with absolute assurance that there would be nothing that would be askew from what they would expect. So my experiences in the City of Newark, black/white type of experiences were always pretty good. Oh yes, we had some problems here and there, but nothing concomitant with what I see happening today.

Q: Right. So it's sort of like a reverse situation. What about clothing stores? Were you able to

buy clothing, like without credit, or were you extended credit in reference to clothing?

Clark: Well, there were always stores that would give you layaway plans and let you buy the clothing. You would have to pay x amount a week. I remember the second hand stores on Spruce Street. I had no money. And my mother would go into the second hand stores and get me second hand clothes. I really didn't like it, but I had no alternative but to wear it. And I probably really didn't care because my value system at that particular point was not as materialistic as it ultimately would become. But as the years began to wain, became seventeen, eighteen. Although I worked hard, I shined shoes, I've been working since I was eight years old. Carrying groceries at the Acme Market on Clinton Avenue. I made a whole bundle of money, my brother and I. Who ended up being a lieutenant on the Newark Police Department. Now he's the director of police for the Essex County College. We would carry groceries from can't see morning to can't see night. After we did that, we would go and shine shoes. We would deliver the Star Ledger and the Evening News. And after all of that, we would do side jobs at the homes of what we assumed then were the very wealthy people who lived on HIgh Street. So those are just some of the things that. Ultimately as I grew older, I realized the importance of clothes. And we would have our suits made at Wilner's and Shank's. You know, not to have a suit made then or pants made then would make you an anachronism So we had to be stylish and you had to do the type of things that I did not have the money to do, but yet we still, once in a while I would save my money and put it on layaway. And it was the greatest event of my life when I would step out with my bell bottoms that I just purchased, hand made, from Wilner's in Newark.

Q: That was a thrill.

Clark: That was the thrill of my life.

Q: And you were able to pay cash for it because you were working.

Clark: Well, I wasn't able to pay cash. I put it on layaway. I'd pay fifty cents or a dollar a week

until I was able to amass enough money to get those pants or to get that suit, tailor made.

Q: And the family, they probably did the same thing with their clothes

Clark: That's what I observed happening to a large degree, welfare, not welfare, layaways, and all of the types of gambits and machinations and [?] that were so epidemic in the poor community. Probably didn't matter whether you were black or white. If you're poor, you're poor.

Q: You're poor.

Clark: And the things were pretty much applicable to all people.

Q: What about church? Was the family close knit in going to church?

Clark: We went to church in the morning, Sunday School, we didn't get back until seven, eight o'clock at night. Abyssinian Baptist Church in Newark on West Kenney Street. I'll never forget the number, 224-6 West Kenney Street. And that was the hub of activity. I also would go to prayer meeting every Wednesday. My grandmother, I call her my grandmother, was a Pentecostal person. And she would have me in prayer meeting very Wednesday. That was the avenue that kept me from going to jail and from getting in trouble because I was indoctrinated. I was indoctrinated with the ideology that God was in the skies looking down on me, and I dare not do anything that would violate the principles of Christendom. And that kept me out of much trouble.

Q: He would come down and get you.

Clark: Come down and get me, one way or another. Either by the iron cord my mother would put on my posterior or some other rather wicket force.

Q: So you grew up under the rod, you know, as they say. You know, daring not to do anything

different. Did you know of any families, I'm pretty sure that your family didn't indulge in a witchcraft, or sniffing up snuff and all that kind of stuff?

Clark: Well, that's just the antithesis. Sure my ancestors sniffed snuff. I can still see them now putting it in their gums. I don't know how they did it, but they would put it down there somehow. I would see this type of thing going on. My mother loved Beechnut snuff. My grandfather loved Beechnut snuff. Yes, that was a very prevalent thing. And I would see things in my house. I don't know what was going on because back then parents kept things away from you. You never knew about sex. All you knew, all I ever knew is that I would see my mother one day, and the next day I would see her going to the hospital, and she was saying that she was going, that Miss Fawn had brought a baby. And I didn't know what was going on. But they kept everything hidden. A lot of things that you see happen today were an anathema back then. You just didn't get involved in that type of exposure. We knew something was going on. I know they would have teas at my house. I never forget. And I never knew the essence of what was happening. Didn't care. But I would see people going to the little back room. I don't know who was in the back room, but there was something going on back there with somebody reading palms or doing something.

Q: The teas and all that.

Clark: I don't know. But those were the types of intriguing things that brought some type of interest and camaraderie to an overall neighborhood that I'm afraid does not exist today.

Q: Right.

Clark: Your politicians were probably just as they are now. You can't trust politicians I found out in general. I guess some you can, but most of them I found are not necessarily the most savory people in the world. But politicians were more available I felt then then they are now. Teachers were more dedicated I felt then then now. A lot of things that existed then, and I'm not saying

that was a great era. I'm just simply looking at living conditions, and safety and tranquility and morals and values. I would say much higher then then now.

Q: Speaking of politicians, did you recall or ever have the opportunity of meeting Irving Turner, who was our black first City Councilman here in Newark?

Clark: Everybody knew Irving Turner. We knew him very well. He was very ubiquitous,, omnipresent. Typical of the politicians back then.

Q: Right. Was he able to improve the quality of life for African-Americans do you think? Do anything he accomplished?

Clark: I don't think the politicians did anything of any major consequence then or now for anybody except themselves. And anybody who thinks any different much not be living on this planet with a complete deck. Because people basically are self-aggrandizing whether it be Jesse Jackson or any of the other individuals. Even there, you might find a person who's committed. I like to think that Sharp James is committed individual for the City of Newark. But by and large, I don't this is indicative of what I knew to be. [Interruption to take phone call]

Q: There was a person who called himself the Mayor of Springfield Avenue. Do you have any knowledge of who that individual was?

Clark: Yeah, I don't know who it was, but I would hear. You'd have different mayors of different areas, self-imposed by and large. You still have some of that today, but not at the level that it used to be. This was something that was in vogue. So I don't recall who the individual was right now.

Q: Tell me something about your work background and your first job.

Clark: My first job was carrying groceries, shining shoes, delivering papers, hustling. Going to the

store for the elderly. Anything, selling Kool-Ade. We'd have Kool-Ade stands. Get ice cream My mother used to get those ice cream churners, I guess you call them, churn the ice cream. After churn the ice cream, we would sell it five cents a scoop, or two cents a scoop. Anything to make an honest living. Kool-Ade. And people would come and purchase it. Most often they would not drink the Kool-Ade. They would just give you a donation. That was good. But those were the type of things you did early on. But my major types of work came from carrying groceries, delivering newspapers, shoveling snow. These were all the types of things that gave me a work ethic, a sense of punctuality, a sense of profit too, a sense of being in charge of your destiny, a sense of not sitting around holding a pity party for yourself, being an oversensitive crybaby, expecting others to do for what God has given you the strength to do for yourself. So that's been going on since I was four, five, six years old. It has not stopped and it never will. Because I feel that we must be in charge of our own destiny.

Q: Right. As African-Americans we have to be. Did you recall the Kruegers or Louise Scott?

Clark: Of course. I knew the Scott building on High Street there. If that's the same building you're alluding too.

Q: That's the building.

Clark: Right across from St. James.

Q: Right.

Clark: It was a very exquisite. I knew that because my dentist was Dr. Shelting years ago, who was right down the street. And I went to Central so every morning I didn't have money to ride the 46 bus, High Street Bus. So I had to walk from Quitman Street by the Scott Manor all the way to Central High School every day. So how well familiar I am with Scott's Manor.

Q: The Kruegers. Did you have a chance to meet them?

Clark: No. I never met them. That was sort of a place that you knew you had no business in.

Q: Okay. So you didn't go in?

Clark: Didn't go in, just walked by.

Q: What about Louise Scott? Did you know her?

Clark: I knew her. I think her daughter was a singer Scott. Maybe they're not related. But I did not know them, but you know of them.

Q: So your life in Newark has been a fulfilling life, and you've been noted for your works as an educator, baseball bat man as some people relate to you. Tell us something about your educational background as far as that particular situation in Paterson.

Clark: Well, I was fortunate to have gotten a good education in the City of Newark. Contrary and contradictory to what's happened today. Black youth today are academically inferior to whites. And we'd better do something about that. Otherwise, this race can't survive much longer. I think they're playing political games with the lives of young people, black people and poor people. And it doesn't matter whether you're black, white or hispanic. If you're poor, you find yourself in dire straits academically and educationally. But I was able to get a very sound education from Monmouth Street School, Cleveland Junior High, and certainly Central High School that was the enabling factor to help me transcend the vicissitudes of difficulties and conflicts that were so evident in the ghetto as we knew it then. I had the skills. I did not have proper guidance. I was a straight A student, number five in my class in fact at Central High School. But no one ever told me about college. All I knew is that I had all As, and I knew that meant something. And I went to Upsala College with my transcript; they didn't believe that these were my grades. They get

mesmerized that I had all As and I never knew anything about an SAT because nobody ever told me. And that's why I'm livid and I'm upset with the educational process. Because they destroyed many lives of many people because of lack of guidance and lack of leadership by your guidance counselors specifically. The only people I saw of any consequence were teachers and preachers. You didn't see very many other people. You saw very seldom a bus driver, very seldom a policeman that happened to have been black. You saw, in my entire educational career, I've only had three black teachers. That's through college too ironically. So there was not much imagery. The only thing that you knew for sure was the preacher man and an occasional teacher that you would see.

Q: Was the preacher from Abyssinian he was able to give I'm pretty sure you and your sisters, I mean your brother some good guidelines in?

Clark: Well, I don't know how much he did. But the church community did. And the community in general did. Because it appeared to me that everyone was sort of concerned about your welfare. Certain things you did not do and could not do cause even a stranger or even a person in the community for something that you were doing that was not consistent with the mores or folkways and the value systems that were quite evident in the community. You don't have that today.

Q: What can you tell me about the riots?

Clark: It was a devastating experience. You know, I had a paper franchise in the City of Newark then. And I was not intimidated myself, but I saw things that were, to me, tantamount to an insurrection within the confines of the City of Newark. Which destroyed the City. The City never recovered from it. Were there reasons for it? The more I delve into it, I don't know about the sociological and psychological effects and impacts that lead to the totality of the destructive mechanism. But one thing that I do know for sure that there were some people who were not rioting over social conditions, they were just, well, they were just stealing. They were a bunch of thieves who were stealing. And what they were doing many of the times had nothing to do with

their social conditions. I saw people stealing liquor, clothes and doing all the things that I saw in Los Angeles during the riots there that were not consistent with social revolution. It was hooliganism in many instances. They were a bunch of damn thugs stealing.

Q: It was an opportunity for them.

Clark: That's what I perceived it as being. And many times I find that to be, to be the case. I think that what happened when those insurrections or riots was that you caught the system unprepared to deal with it. You can't do that in 1996. They're well prepared to obliterate you and take care of the situation in an expeditious manner. I believe that there should be a way to grieve and a grievance process where you can make sure that people are held accountable for many, many things. But I firmly believe that change never comes from the top down. Ultimately it comes from the bottom up.

Q: As far as traditional celebrations in Newark, can you tell me anything about ethnic celebrations?

Clark: Well, sure. You know, the big days in the City of Newark was. I remember very well when Joe Lewis would have a fight. We didn't have TV, but the radios were going in the black community. That was a celebration. We would knock people out. We celebrated. We did all the huckabuck up and down the streets, and the camel walk. We were able to celebrate with glee and with ecstacism. Christmas was always very important to me. Christmas you always got something regardless of how poor you were. And I believed in Santa Claus until I was like ten, twelve years old. Your parents made you believe in Santa Claus. Made you believe in somebody coming down the chimney. At eight o'clock at night I was sound asleep because I didn't want Santa Claus to come, find me awake and not leave my gift.

Q: It was real.

Clark: It was a real thing to me. Didn't know the intricacies of it. As I grew older, you know, I didn't teach my children that. Because I told them right on, there's no such thing as Santa Claus. I didn't let them fantasize and enjoy the ecstasy of that juvenile experience that I had. You know, but I wanted to make sure that they understood that I was the Santa Claus. But that's why, even today I see people celebrating Kwanza and those things. I like Christmas. I don't know nothing about Kwanza. I don't care about Kwanza. It's not my concern. I like Christmas. And I don't care. People do what they want to do. Don't impose your Kwanza on me, and I won't impose my Christmas on you. I like Christmas.

Q: I do too. You know, I guess we're from the old school. You know, that we like the old fashioned traditions even though.

Clark: I was brainwashed with it. I know. And I tell people constantly, they want to try to impose new visions on you. I was brainwashed when I was brought to this country. They made me a Christian, brainwashed me. They brainwashed me with Christianity. They brainwashed me with Christmas and Easter. I don't want to be brainwashed anymore with Kwanza. I've been brainwashed enough.

Q: [Telephone ringing] Do you want to get that? What about music? Tell me something about the happenings of music in Newark. Jazz clubs and.

Clark: Well, there were jazz clubs. I remember Club 60 on Monmouth Street. That was not a jazz club. That was more like a social club. I remember the Key Club. I remember Sugar Hall, Notty's, Bill Giant's. The Silver Star on Spruce Street. The Alcazar. A lot of places were around. And they were places where went just to chill out nicely. Older people. Like, you know, you couldn't go in there. You would go by and just look and see. But you never had real exposure to it. The songs. Frankie Lyman and Jimmie Scott and Jackie Wilson. A lot of fine artists. And, of course, the jazz. We would go to Birdland in New York to the jazz clubs. And see Myles and see Sonny Spitt and Sonny Rawlings. And do all the type of things that were

mindboggling as I look at it. But I like all kinds of music. I like country and western. Today I like country and western. And I like classical music. I'm not just engulfed by jazz or anything. I like to expose myself to whatever I like to do at any given time. But the jazz was very popular. Not as pervasively popular probably as a lot of people thought because a lot of people didn't like jazz. There were a lot of Christians who liked different things. And, you know, gospel was very, very, very big back then. You had the quartets and the singing groups that probably was more pervasive then the elements of jazz. You know, but somehow it did not capture the totality of the media experience that it ought to have in my opinion.

Q: Right. Did you know Sarah Vaughn?

Clark: She's my cousin. Sarah Vaughn was my cousin. She lived on Avon Place there.

Q: You're kidding. Tell me something about Sarah's life.

Clark: I don't know that much about it because she was on my father's side. And my father would always go and see her, but I never had time. She lived in a big house. I just never had contact. I just know she's a relative.

Q: Just a relative. You stated that you had children, but you didn't mention anything about your wife.

Clark: Well, I indicated before that I'm single. There's nothing to talk about.

Q: All right. Okay. Is there anything else you want to share with me about your life in the City of Newark?

Clark: My life has been like a roller coaster. Sometimes up, sometimes down. I've been able to go from the depths of despair to the perforators of success. Able to achieve with the help of God

more things than any mortal could ever have aspired to obtain. The Cup of Time, one of the most incredible books in literary history, my book Laying Down the Law. Two Sixty Minute profiles, presidential citations, Ted Koppel show three times. It's all over. A movie. I mean, when you look at the totality of my blessings from above, I have been blessed. And I'm thankful.

Q: Great. I know I've followed your life. Quite frequently, every time that I have chance to watch or read something about you, it's always fascinating. You know, and being a man of color, I hold you in high esteem.

Clark: Well, you know, sometimes I've been a pigeon. Sometimes I'm a statue. But I will never, never give in. That's why I'm here today, working in this jail. Because I'm not going to be like many of the other black Americans are, walking to Washington. The Million Man March to Washington, the Hundred Man March to Trenton. All those type of things are made of the stuff that makes the males grow in 1996. What we need are individuals who want to really become part of the struggle. To bring about a rejuvenation, a [?] to the decadence that's engulfing the young people in our society.

Q: Your position here at the Youth House. Could you perhaps share some of that information.

Clark: I am the director of the --

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Q: Tell me a little bit more about the Youth House, summarizing your role here and what you've done to make the changes for the better.

Clark: I am the director of the Essex County Juvenile Detention Center. This building. As you might note, they're building a brand new jail in the back of us to replace this anachronistic compilation of granite. My job is to, was to bring about a change in this decadent environment

that had lead to many outlandish scandals and many accusations and allegations about the deleterious factors that were taking place in this facility. And I might state I'm here for one reason and one reason only. I want to be part of the structure. I want to be that gadfly, that motivator, that crusader who's working unswervingly and tenaciously to bring about a change to help lift our young people out of the depths of despair and take them towards a perfect cadence of achievement and success.

Q: Well, Mr. Clark, this interview has been one of the highlights of my life. I personally as an interviewer for the Scott-Krueger Cultural Oral History Project thank you for your time, the information you have given us we can well use. As I stated, it will be placed in the Scott-Krueger Cultural Center, and other people will be able to hear your story. And say that you've been an asset not only to Essex County but to the State of New Jersey and people all over this country. Thank you.

Clark: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW